

Sibling Needs – Helpful Information for Parents

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I. DEVELOPMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS

WHAT DO YOU TELL.....

1. PRESCHOOLERS (BEFORE AGE 5)

Children in this age group are unable to articulate their feelings about things, so they will likely show their feelings through behaviors. They will be unable to understand the special needs of their sibling, but they will notice differences and try to teach their brother or sister. Children of this age are likely to enjoy their sibling because they have not learned to be judgmental, and their feelings toward their siblings will likely be linked to "normal" sibling interactions.

2. ELEMENTARY SCHOOL AGE (6 - 12)

These children start venturing out into the world and become acutely aware of the differences between people. They have the ability to understand a definition and explanation of their sibling's special need as long as it is explained to them in terms they can understand. They may worry that the disability is contagious or wonder if something is wrong with them, too. They may also experience guilt for having negative thoughts or feelings about their sibling as well as, guilt for being the child who is not disabled.

Some typical responses of children this age are to become OVER helpful and well-behaved or to become non-compliant in order to obtain a parent's attention. Throughout this age span, the children will have conflicting feelings about their sibling. This happens in sibling relationships that do not include a disability, too.

3. ADOLESCENTS (13 - 17)

Adolescents have the capability of understanding more elaborate explanations of the particular disability. They may ask detailed and provocative questions. The developmental task of adolescence is to begin discovering oneself outside of the family. At the same time, conformity with a peer group is important. Therefore, for children this age having a sibling who is different MAY be embarrassing in front of friends and dates. They may feel torn

between their desire for independence from the family and maintaining a special relationship with their sibling. They may resent the amount of responsibility, and they may begin worrying about their sibling's future.

A. Educate Your Children

Provide information to the child about how the condition is evaluated, diagnosed, and treated.

- the children need to know what the disability is and what to expect
- explain strengths and weaknesses of the child with the disability
- explain ways to interact with sibling
- explain ways to help with sibling

B. Balance Time Spent with Children

- encourage child to have activities unique to him/her
- parental participation in activities outside the disability world/community.
- parental recognition of child's strengths and accomplishments

C. Open Discussion

- open discussion in the family should exist where members' positive and negative feelings are expressed
- discussion of ways to cope with stressful events such as peers and public reaction, as well as, unexpected changes in family plans, extra home responsibility

D. Sibling Groups

- participation in a group for siblings allows the children to meet others who are in the same circumstance
- provides children with the chance to discuss feelings which may be difficult to express to the family

II. WARNING SIGNS

A. Depression

- change in child's sleeping habits
- change in child's eating habits
- sense of helplessness/hopelessness
- continued sense of irritability
- mentions hurting self (i.e. "I wish I was dead")
- difficulty making decisions or concentrating
- lack of pleasure in activities
- social withdrawal
- low self-esteem

B. Anxiety

- excessive worry
- increased energy level without a purpose
- tearful at slightest frustration
- has difficulty separating from parents
- sleeping problems or change in sleeping habits
- changes in eating habits
- school phobia
- worry about health or well-being of family members
- somatic symptoms (i.e. stomachaches and headaches)
- perfectionism

If your child displays a number of these symptoms for a prolonged period of time (2 weeks or more), it may be advisable to discuss the situation with the child's pediatrician or a local mental health professional.

References and Recommended Readings

- Bodenheimer, C. (1979). *Everybody is a Person: a book for brothers and sisters of autistic kids*. Syracuse, NY: Jowonio: The Learning Place. (Jowonio: The Learning Place, 215 Bassett Street, Syracuse, NY 13210). (middle school level)
- Gold, P. (1975). *Please Don't Say Hello*. New York: Human Services. (primary to middle school level)
- Harris, s. (1994). *Siblings of Children with Autism*. Woodbine House, Bethesda, MD (parents and professionals)
- Lobato, D. (1990). *Brothers, Sisters, and Special Needs*. Paul Brooks, Baltimore, MD. (parents and professionals)
- Nollette, C. (1985). *Having a Brother Like David*. Fraser Child and Family Center, 2520 Minnehaha Ave. S., Minneapolis, MN 55404 (612) 729-6001 (primary to middle school level)
- Parker, R. (1974). *He is Your Brother*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc. (middle-junior high school level)
- Powell, T.H. and Ogle, P.A. (1985). *Brothers and Sisters - A Special Part of Exceptional Families*. Baltimore, Maryland: Paul Brookes Publishing (parents and professionals)
- Powers, M. (1989). *Children with Autism: A Parent's Guide*. New York: Woodbine House. (parents and professionals)